

## Mental Health through Literature

Lesson Title: Mental Health3: Mental Health Through Literature  
Page 1 of 1

### Teacher Sheet

#### 1. What evidence is given suggesting a mental disorder in the character of King Lear?

*Based on the Batholomaeus Anglicus' 13<sup>th</sup>-century traditional model of illness, it is argued that King Lear did not suffer from melancholy or madness (in general), but ultimately descended into madness due to an "excess" or imbalance in the choleric humour, also referred to as "the frenesie."*

*The author also provides Timothy Bright's non-humour model and suggests that King Lear is driven by his hard circumstances into a state of unnatural melancholy, which "can be recognized by its occurrence in situations when it seems more natural to go mad: situations in which the mind is tormented by worry and stress." The author supports this view by asserting that King Lear "is naturally choleric rather than melancholic, and he certainly has recognizable cause to go mad from mental stress and guilt."*

#### 2. Describe the character of King Lear, as revealed in the essay.

*Answers will vary. The author describes King Lear as being largely "choleric" before his descent into madness. From their earlier study of the "four humours," students may recall that choleric people are characterized as being "short-tempered, red-haired, thin, ambitious."*

*In general, however, students will conclude from the reading that King Lear was once a strong and proud ruler who was ultimately driven into madness—involving worry, stress, guilt, and "evyll suspicions"—by his "dog-hearted" daughters. It is also suggested that his dark mental state was "a journey as much as [it was] an illness."*

#### 3. How was King Lear's behavior viewed by other characters and by society at large?

*Answers will vary. Students will conclude that others viewed the previously proud and choleric King Lear as being reduced to madness and deep humility by the work of his daughters, by losing a war, and by being led to prison, among other things.*

*The author says that people of Shakespeare's day concluded that King Lear's madness was "a result of his arrogance and a remedy for it," providing him with "both punishment and insight." Moreover, King Lear had to suffer greatly "before attaining enlightenment. This vision of madness is characteristic of Shakespeare's era. The Renaissance held the Aristotelian view that there is a fine line between madness and divine inspiration (Skultans 20), but by the eighteenth century madness was viewed as no more than degradation and shame." This is why a "happier" version of the play became so popular in later years.*

#### 4. Would that behavior be regarded in the same way today? Why or why not?

*Accept all reasonable responses. Thanks to several centuries of progress and enlightenment in the area of mental health and psychology, many will assert that King Lear had sufficient reason to become "maddened" by the personal tragedies he faced. As "rest" and "forgiveness" proved to be helpful in easing his madness, many will argue that both King Lear and the era he lived in provided insufficient mental health knowledge, support, and treatment to bring him out of the "madness" he was suffering. Some may also suggest that the personal loss and suffering that finally led to his "learning to love" was essentially hard-earned personal growth.*